
MARISSA MEYER
THE QUEEN'S ARMY


TOR·COM

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They came at the end of the long night, when the manufacturing dome had not seen sunlight for almost two weeks. Z had crossed his twelfth birthday some months ago, and just enough time had passed that he'd stopped imagining glimpses of gold embroidery on black coats. He'd just stopped questioning every thought that flickered through his brain. He had just begun to hope that he would not be chosen.

But he was not surprised when he was awoken by a tap at the front door. It was so early that his father hadn't left for the plant where he assembled engines for podships and tractors. Z stared at the dark ceiling and listened to his parents' whisperings through the wall, then to his father's footsteps padding past his door.

Muffled voices in the front room.

Z balled up his blanket between his fists and tried to pour all his fears into it, and then release them all at once. He had to do it three times to keep from hyperventilating. He didn't want his brother, still asleep on the other side of the room, to be afraid for him.

He had known this was inevitable.

He was at the top of his class. He was stronger than some of the men his father worked with in the plant. Still, he'd thought that maybe his instructors would overlook him. Maybe he would be skipped.

But those thoughts were always flitting. Since he was a little boy, he had been raised to expect a visit from the queen's thaumaturges during his twelfth year, and knew if he was deemed worthy, he would be conscripted into the new army she was building. It was a great honor to serve his crown. It would bring pride to his family and his sector.

"You should get dressed."

He lifted his head to find his brother's eyes shining in the darkness. So he wasn't asleep after all.

"They'll ask for you soon. You don't want to make them wait."

Not wanting his brother to think he was scared, he swung his legs out of the bed.

He met his mother in the hallway. Her cropped hair was sticking up on one side and she had pulled on a cotton dress, though the static of her slip had it clinging around her left thigh. She paused from adjusting the material, and, for one crushing second, he saw the despair that she'd always hidden when they talked about the soldier conscription. Then it was gone and she was licking her fingers and desperately trying to soothe down Z's unkempt hair. He flinched, but didn't fidget or complain, until his father appeared beside them.

"Ze'ev." His voice was thick with an emotion that Z didn't recognize. "Don't be afraid."

His father took his hand and guided him into the front of the house where not one but two thaumaturges were waiting for him. They both wore the traditional uniform of the queen's court—high-collared coats that swept down to their thighs, with wide, elaborately embroidered sleeves. However, the woman wore black, denoting a third-level thaumaturge, while the man wore red. Second level. Z didn't think there were more than a dozen second-level thaumaturges on all of Luna, and now one was standing in his house.

He couldn’t help picturing his home as it must look through the eyes of such high officials. The front room was large enough only for a worn sofa and a rocking chair, and his mom kept a vase of dusty faux flowers on the side table. If they’d bothered to look through the second doorway, they would have seen a sink piled with dishes where flies were buzzing, because his mother had been too tired to clean last night and Ran and Z had decided to play kicks with the other sector kids rather than do their chores. He regretted that now.

“Ze’ev Kesley?” said the man, the second level.

He nodded, clutching his father’s hand and using all his will not to duck behind him.

“I am pleased to inform you that we have reviewed your aptitude tests and chosen you to receive the physical modifications and training in order to become one of the great soldiers of Her Majesty’s army. Your enrollment is effective immediately. There is no need to pack any belongings—you will be provided with all that you need. As it is expected that henceforth you will have no more contact with your biological family, you may now say your good-byes.”

His mother sucked in a breath behind him. Z didn’t realize he was shaking until his father turned and grasped him by both shoulders.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said again. A faint smile flickered, then disappeared. “Do what they ask, and make us proud. This is a great honor.”

His voice was strained. Z couldn’t tell if his father believed what he was saying, or if it was only a show for the thaumaturges.

His chest constricted. “But…I don’t want to go.”

His father’s face became stern. “Ze’ev.”

Z looked at his mother. Her dress was still clinging to her slip but she’d stopped fidgeting. The tears hadn’t yet spilled

over onto her cheeks. There were wrinkles around her eyes that he'd never noticed before.

"Please," he said, wrapping his arms around her waist. He knew how strong he was. If he held on tight enough, they could never force him to let go. He clamped his eyes shut as the first hot tears slipped out. "Please don't let them—"

Just as a sob tore at his throat, a shadowy new thought slipped to the forefront of his mind.

This was a small, pathetic house in an inconsequential manufacturing dome.

The people here were miserable and unimportant. His parents were weak and stupid—but *he*, he was destined for greatness. He was one of the selected few to serve the queen herself. It was an honor. The thought of lingering here a moment longer made him sick.

Z gasped and pulled away from his mother. Heat was crawling up his neck—spurred by mortification and shame. How could he think such things?

Worse yet, he was still thinking them, somewhere in his head. He couldn't shake them entirely, no matter how much guilt they stirred up.

He turned to gape at the thaumaturges. The woman had a smile toying around her mouth. Though he'd first thought she was pretty, this new expression made him shudder.

"You will be given a new family soon enough," she said, in a voice that lilted like a nursery rhyme. "We have means of making you accept this and come willingly, should we be inclined to use them."

Z cringed, repulsed by the knowledge that she had seen these horrible thoughts. Not only seen them—she had created them. She had been manipulating him, and it had been so seamless, had intertwined with his own emotions so effortlessly. When his peers practiced mind control on one another or an instructor prodded him with thoughts of obedience, it felt like a new idea being etched into his brain.

It was recognizable and, often, he found that with enough focus he could defy it.

This was a different level of manipulation, one that he couldn’t resist so easily. He knew it then. He would be forced to go with them, and he would become a puppet of Her Majesty, with no more willpower than a trained dog.

Behind him, he heard his bedroom door opening.

Ran had come out to watch—pulled by his curiosity.

Z tightened his jaw and tried his best to stifle his mounting despair. He would be brave—so his brother would not see his fear. He would be strong for him.

Some of the terror and dread did begin to fade once the decision was reached. Empowered by the knowledge that it was his choice—that the thaumaturges had not made it for him—he faced his mother and stood on his tiptoes to kiss her cheek. She grabbed at him before he could pull back and crushed him against her, pressing a frantic kiss against his hair. When she released him, just as quickly, the tears had begun to fall and she had to turn her face away to hide them.

He embraced his father too, just as brief and just as fierce so he would know how much love was put into it.

Then he squared his shoulders and stepped toward the thaumaturges.

The woman’s grin returned. “Welcome to the queen’s army.”

They said the anesthesia would give him such a deep, empty sleep that there would be no dreams, but they were wrong. He dreamt of needles burrowing into his skin. He dreamt of pliers gripping his teeth. He dreamt of hot ashes and smoke in his eyes. He dreamt of a white tundra, a cold he had never known, and a hunger barely satiated by dripping meat in his jaws.

Mostly, he dreamt of howls in the distance. Forlorn cries that went on and on and on.

The waking came slowly, like being pulled up from a pit of mud. The howls began to dim as he pried open his eyes. He was in the same room that he'd been in when the nameless nurse had stuck the needle into his arm, but he knew instantly that he was changed. The walls around him were a brighter, crisper white than he'd ever known. The sound of every machine and contraption reverberated in his skull. The scent of chemicals and ammonia invaded his nostrils, making him want to gag, but he was too weak.

His limbs were heavy on the exam table, his joints aching. He wore an oversized shirt that made him feel vulnerable and cold. There was a lump beneath his neck. Forcing his fumbling arm to move, he reached behind his head to find bandages there.

As his awareness sharpened, he struggled to recall what little information the nurse had given him.

All soldiers were modified to increase their effectiveness as members of the queen's army. He would wake up *improved*.

He took in another breath and this time picked up on a new scent. No, two scents.

Two individual odors made up of pheromones and sweat and soap and chemicals. Coming closer.

The door opened and a man and woman entered. The woman wore a white lab jacket and had spiky auburn hair.

The man was a thaumaturge, but not one who had taken Z from his home. He had dark, wavy hair that he'd tucked back behind both ears and eyes that were as black as the sky. They matched his tailored, third-level thaumaturge coat.

And Z could pick out every unique odor on them—lotions and cosmetics and hormones.

"Good," said the woman, pressing her finger against a pad on the wall. The exam table began to hum and Z was raised to a seated position. He grasped at the thin blanket

around his chest. “Your monitor informed me that you were awake. I am Dr. Murphy. I presided over your surgeries. How are you feeling?”

Z squinted at her. “I’m not…am I—”

He hesitated as his tongue found something foreign in his mouth. He clasped his hand over his lips, then reached inside. The pad of his thumb found the sharp point of a fang and he jerked it away.

“Careful,” said the woman. “Your new implants will serve as some of your most effective weapons. May I?”

He didn’t resist as she pulled his jaw open and examined his teeth. “Your gums are healing nicely. We replaced all of your teeth, otherwise there wouldn’t be room for the canines. We’ve also reinforced your jaw for additional leverage and pressure. You’ll likely be sore for another ten to fourteen days, especially as we wean you off the pain killers. How are your eyes?” She pulled a contraption out of her pocket and flickered a light across his pupils. “You’ll likely notice increased pigmentation—it’s nothing to concern yourself with. Once your optic nerves adapt, you’ll find that your eyesight has become optimized to detect and pinpoint motion. Do let your thaumaturge know if you experience any dizziness, blurred vision, or dark spots. I trust you’re already experiencing heightened senses of hearing and smell?”

It took him a moment to realize it was a question, and he gave a shaky nod.

“Excellent. The rest of your modifications will evolve over the next eight to twelve months. As your body adapts to the genetic alterations, you’ll notice new muscle strength, agility, flexibility, and stamina. All this will come with increased metabolism, so you’ll find yourself eating more in the coming months. Even more than a normal twelve-year-old boy, that is.” Her eyes twinkled.

Z’s pulse began to pound against his temples.

“But we’ve prepared for all that,” she continued when he didn’t laugh. “Soldiers are provided a high-protein diet that

we've created for your specific needs. Do you have any questions before I hand you off to Thaumaturge Jael?"

His breathing was becoming more and more difficult to soothe. "What's going to happen to me? In the next…eight to twelve months?"

She flashed a braggart's smile. "You'll become a soldier, of course." She held up the small device again. With a tap, a holograph emerged, showing two rotating images.

One, a young male, perhaps in his late teens.

The other, a white wolf.

"Based on years of research and trials, we have perfected our methods of genetic engineering, allowing us to combine select genes of Her Majesty's prized *Canis lupus arctos* with those of still-developing Lunar males." She tapped another button and the two holographs merged. Z sucked in a breath. This new creature had rounded shoulders, and enormous hands that were covered with a fine layer of fur, and fangs that jutted from a grotesquely twisted mouth. More fur covered his face, surrounding severe yellow eyes.

Z pushed himself back into the exam table.

"Using this method," continued the doctor, "we have created the ultimate soldier. Strong and fearless, with the instincts of one of nature's greatest predators. Most important, he is a soldier who is entirely subject to the will of his thaumaturge." She shut off the holograph. "But Thaumaturge Jael will be able to explain all that to you in due time."

"Th-that's going to happen to me?"

The doctor opened her mouth to speak, but the thaumaturge cleared his throat and took a step toward the bed. "Perhaps, or perhaps not. You have undergone the modifications to give you the skills all soldiers require. But we chose to withhold the more *animalistic* changes. For now."

"Though we can complete the necessary mutations at any time," added the doctor.

“But—why not…”

“You have been selected as one of only five hundred conscripts to receive special training. Your aptitude tests suggest you could be valuable to us as more than a member of the infantry, and Her Majesty is preparing a unit of soldiers to play a very specific role.” He listed his head. “Whether or not you are admitted into that program will ultimately depend on the promise you display during your training.”

The threatening look the thaumaturge pinned on him wasn’t necessary. Z never wanted to be back on this exam table. He never wanted another needle beneath his skin. He never wanted to wake up with fur on his face and eyes that had no humanity behind them.

The queen was making a different kind of soldier, and he had already decided that he would be one of them.

He was kept in the facility for another twenty-four hours, so that the doctor could monitor how his body was reacting to the surgeries. He discovered that what had seemed like a few hours of nightmares had, in reality, been twenty-six days of being kept comatose in a suspended animation tank while his body underwent the surgeries and adapted to the mutations. Twenty-six days, gone, while his DNA melded with that of a white wolf, while nameless doctors and scientists turned him into a beast to serve his queen. In that time, the sun had come and gone, plunging the great city of Artemisia into another long night.

The next day, he found a pile of clothes left beside his bed—soft brown pants, a black T-shirt, and plain boots. They fit him perfectly.

He had just finished dressing when he smelled someone coming—the thaumaturge from the day before. His nausea from his new heightened sense of smell had quelled during

the night, but a new sinking, crawling feeling settled in Z's gut as the thaumaturge entered the room.

Because another sense was missing.

The telltale vibration of energy that his people could perceive and manipulate. It was gone.

His throat clamped. "Something's wrong with me," he said, before the thaumaturge could speak. "My gift. It's…I think something's wrong."

The thaumaturge stared blankly for a moment, before his expression softened into kindness. The look eased Z's growing panic. "Yes, I know," he said. "That is an unfortunate result of the modifications. You see, wild animals do not have the abilities that we do, therefore we must hinder your awareness of bioelectricity so that your Lunar instincts will not interfere with your new wolfish instincts. Don't be alarmed—you are not powerless. We have simply given you a new tool with which to take advantage of your gift. It will be my job to ensure that all of your instincts and abilities are functioning properly when you're called on to use them."

Z licked his lips, finding it awkward to maneuver around his new teeth. He had to shut his eyes to force the wash of bile back down his throat.

They had taken away his Lunar gift. He was as vulnerable as an Earthen now. As useless as a shell. And yet, they wanted him to be a soldier?

"We were not properly introduced yesterday," the thaumaturge continued. "You are to call me Master Jael. You will be known as Beta Kesley until and unless your ranking changes. I am glad to see you dressed. Come then."

He left the room and it took Z a scrambling minute to realize he was meant to follow.

"The candidates for special operative status have been given their own training grounds beneath Sector 8," Master Jael said as they left the research facility. Z caught only the briefest glimpse of the glittering white buildings of Artemisia

—Luna’s major city—before Jael led him down into the lava tubes beneath the surface. A personal shuttle was waiting for them. “The training grounds consist of separate barracks for each pack, a community dining hall, and a series of training rooms in which you will perform formations and learn fighting techniques. This is also where you will decide your placement in the pack.”

“The pack?”

“Your new family. We have found that your instincts react best when we mimic the hierarchy of wolves in their natural habitat, and so each pack consists of six to fifteen operatives, depending on the mental strength of their thaumaturge.” His grin widened. “You are my fourteenth pack member.”

Z turned away to watch the black regolith walls pass by the shuttle window, and tried to pretend that he understood what Master Jael was talking about.

The training grounds were in enormous caverns carved into the lava tubes. When they walked into the main room, Jael’s heels clipping with each step, Z saw that thirteen soldiers were already lined up to greet them, dressed exactly as he was. He guessed their ages ranged from twelve to eighteen or older, and though they stood in perfect posture in a straight line, with their heels together and arms stiff at their sides, Z knew instantly who was their leader. The tallest and the largest and the one whose eyes flashed when they met his.

“Master Jael,” he said, and in unison, all the soldiers clasped a fist to their hearts.

“Alpha Brock. You have a new member joining you today. This is Beta Ze’ev Kesley.”

Scrutiny seemed to pass through all the soldiers. Z forced himself to stand up straighter, though it pinched the muscles between his shoulder blades. He took the time to meet each of their gazes, thinking that, though there was a

proliferation of unfamiliar aromas in this hall, he could pick out which scents belonged to each of them.

“Beta Kesley,” said Master Jael, “join your pack.”

Z glanced at the thaumaturge and his pulse skipped. There was something eager in the look, but Z didn’t know what he was expected to do. Did Jael want him to bow? Or clasp his hand to his heart like the others had?

Before he could decide, Z felt a jolt through his nerves, like an electric shock. And then he was pacing toward the line of soldiers, his feet no longer under his control.

Blood rushed to his face.

Mind control.

A surge of defiance crawled up from the base of his throat. Z scrunched his face up, and, with every bit of concentration he had, he forced his legs to freeze. He found himself in an awkward stance, his legs caught midstep, his hands fisted at his sides. He was already panting with the effort.

He pried open his eyes and looked at Master Jael. He was surprised to find amusement, not anger, in the thaumaturge’s expression. Through his teeth, he said, “Thank you, *Master*, but I can walk without your help.”

Jael grinned, and with a snap Z felt the hold on his mind release.

“But of course,” Jael said. “Please, join the line.”

Letting out a breath, Z turned toward his new pack.

He gasped. The leader—Alpha Brock—was now less than an arm’s distance away, a snarl showing the points of his canines.

Before Z could think, a fist collided with his jaw, knocking him onto the floor and shoving the wind out of him. For a moment his lungs burned with the need for air and his head rang from the punch. The pain in his jaw was the worst, his gums still sore from the surgery. The throbbing brought tears to his eyes.

“Don’t ever disrespect Master Jael again,” said Alpha Brock. With a grunt, he landed a kick to Z’s ribs.

Z cried out and crunched into a ball, trying to protect his stomach, but another kick didn’t follow. Tasting blood, he spit onto the chalky ground. He was glad that none of his new teeth came with it.

Shaking, he risked a glance at Master Jael, but the thaumaturge was standing calmly back, his hands in his sleeves. When he caught Z’s gaze, his eyebrows rose without mercy and he said, very slowly, “Get up and join your pack.”

Standing seemed impossible. The world was spinning and he wondered if that one kick hadn’t broken a rib.

But more afraid of the repercussions of ignoring an order than the pain, Z pulled himself to all fours and, with a grunt, pushed himself onto wobbly legs. The Alpha stared down at him as Z stumbled to the end of the line. The other soldiers had not moved.

“You will soon learn,” said Master Jael, “that your placement in this pack is determined by strength, courage, and the ability to defend yourself. You will not see such mercy again.”

Z began to lose track of time. First the days, and then the weeks and months merged into constant training. Formations. Strategies and tactics. And fights—so many fights. Like wolves in the wild fight to determine their rank, these soldiers fought all the time. Constantly trying to best one another, to show off, to prove their worth, to improve their station. Almost all of them seemed to have a thirst for violence that Z couldn’t claim, though he often pretended to desire the taste of blood and the crunch of bones as much as any of them. There wasn’t much choice.

He didn’t win all his fights, but he didn’t lose them all, either. After a year and a half—or what he guessed was close to a year and a half, with neither the long days nor the long nights to judge by—he found himself solidly in the middle of his pack. An average beta. After that one punch from Alpha Brock, he had never again allowed himself to be caught by surprise, and he had developed a knack for parrying and blocking. Offensive tactics didn’t come as naturally, but he could often avoid being hit for long enough to tire out his opponent.

It would never make him Alpha, but it kept him from becoming the tormented Omega.

Alpha Brock, on the other hand, remained ever on top of the pack. Undefeated, he picked more fights than any of them, like he had to constantly remind himself and everyone else how much better he was. Z tried to stay out of his way, but it was impossible to avoid him entirely, and when Brock wanted to fight, there was no denying him. Z had received more bruises and scars from those fists than he could count.

The pack was standing around watching an impromptu brawl between Betas Wynn and Troya when Z caught the scent of Master Jael approaching, along with another scent. Familiar and vague at the same time.

Z tore his eyes from the fight at the same time the others picked up on the scents. The two fighters took another moment, but in a breath, they had released each other, and together they all rushed to line up for Jael’s entrance. Z recognized the cadence of Jael’s footsteps, beside something awkward and shuffling. Jael had not brought anyone new to their barracks since Z himself had joined the pack.

Master Jael stepped out of the cave and into the training cavern, a new conscript at his side.

Z couldn’t keep back a gasp. Beside him, Wynn flinched at the noise, and he was sure they’d all noticed his reaction. He wasn’t the only one with advanced hearing.

But the new conscript was his brother. Taller now, but otherwise not much changed.

Ran took longer to notice him. Standing half a step behind Master Jael, dressed in uniform, pale and wide-eyed, he was busy scanning the faces of his new family.

Until his eyes landed on Z and his scrutiny froze.

“Alpha Brock,” said Jael, “This is the final recruit for your pack, Beta Ran Kesley.”

Together with the rest of the pack, Z clasped his fist to his chest.

“Beta Kesley, you may join your pack.”

Z gulped, waiting for the moment when Ran’s legs would betray him and recognition would flash across his face.

And it came, and Ran’s eyes did widen, but then he bowed his head and put up no resistance as his body joined the others at the end of the line and his balled fist hit his chest.

Z found that his heart was thundering. He wondered if the others could hear it.

He heard Ran’s breathing, three bodies away from him, as Jael released his control.

“Welcome to your new family. Training will commence at 0600 tomorrow. You have much to be caught up on.” Jael spun on his heels and left them without ceremony.

No one moved until both the sound of his footsteps and the scent of his cologne had dissipated.

Then Alpha Brock snorted. The noise sent ice rushing through Z’s veins.

The pack broke formation and within seconds had Ran surrounded.

“Well,” said Alpha Brock. “You did better on your induction than your arrogant brother, at least.”

Ran’s gaze flickered to Z, a look of fear and uncertainty, before flying back to Alpha Brock.

“I honestly didn’t think Master Jael could handle one more member,” Alpha Brock continued, smirking. “You must

be pretty weak-minded for him to have taken you on."

Ran took half a step away. Z could see he was still dazed from the surgeries, his pupils dilated and a sheen of sweat on his brow.

"Leave him alone, Brock," said Z, stepping into the circle. It was the only time he could recall addressing him directly.

Brock turned and peered at Z from the corner of his eye. "What's that, Kesley?"

"Give him some time. We all know you're Alpha—you don't have to bully every twelve-year-old kid who comes in here to prove it."

He thought he heard a snicker behind him, but it was stifled as Brock's expression darkened. He turned toward him fully and Z was surprised at the relief that rushed into him. At least Brock wasn't targeting Ran anymore.

But then Brock spun so fast, his leg lifted for a roundhouse kick, that Z wasn't sure *he* could have blocked it. Brock's foot smashed into Ran's head, hurtling him into Beta Rafe.

White spots flashed in Z's vision and he didn't realize what he was doing until a roar emerged from his throat and his fist collided with Brock's jaw.

Brock stumbled back, surprised, but it was short-lived. Snarling, he flew back at Z and used the leverage of Z's second punch to spin him around, catching Z's head in the crook of his elbow. With one arm pinned at his side, Z growled and tried to toss Brock over him, like he'd learned to throw others when they had him in such a position, but Brock was too big. Z's free hand beat uselessly, pathetically against Brock's ear.

"This is my pack," Brock said. "Don't you ever tell me how to treat them."

The second he was released, Z pushed himself away. But Brock still gripped his wrist. As Z mindlessly sought to put distance between them, he felt a something sharp puncture the flesh beneath his elbow. He cried out and yanked his

arm away, and the sting ripped down his skin, cutting his flesh from elbow to wrist.

Z stumbled away and clutched his arm against his chest. Brock grinned. He'd taken to grooming his nails into knife-sharp points, a trend quickly picked up by the other pack members.

Now Z understood why.

Trying to ignore the pain and the blood dripping down between his fingers, he raised his fists for the next attack.

But Brock merely wiped Z's blood off on his pants and turned away, unconcerned about retribution as the rest of the pack watched on.

Z's stomach sank as Brock turned and spat at his brother, who was still on the ground. Brock's spit landed on his shoulder. Ran didn't back away or bother to wipe it off.

"Lesson number one," said Brock, "Never let someone else take your fights for you."

Z didn't let his fists down until Brock had led the rest of the pack away. Then he whipped off his shirt and wrapped the fabric around the wound. It didn't take long for the blood to soak through.

"Ran—are you all right? Is your jaw broken?" He stumbled toward his brother and held a hand toward him. But when Ran met his gaze, it was not with gratitude, but anger.

"Why did you do that?" he said, rubbing his cheek. "Did you have to embarrass me on my first day?"

Z drew back. "Ran…"

Ignoring the extended hand, Ran climbed to his feet. "You always have to show me up. I thought this was my chance to prove myself, but of all the soldiers, I have to be grouped with *you.* Stuck in your shadow, again." He shook his head and Z thought maybe there was wetness in his eyes before he spun away. "Just leave me alone, Z. Just…forget we were ever brothers at all."

It had been nearly five years since Z had undergone the genetic modifications. Five years without seeing his parents. Five years spent underground—fighting and brawling and training. Not another word had ever been spoken about the possibility of being chosen for the queen's special soldiers, but it was never far from his mind. He frequently awoke from dreams of long syringes and fur covering his body.

There were fifty packs that had been held back from the full surgeries, and they gathered daily for an hour-long feast in the dining hall. It was during the feasts that Z felt most like the animal they wanted him to be. The stench was overwhelming—sweat and blood from all five hundred soldiers mixed with rare cuts of meat that were presented on slabs of wood and stone. They often fought over the choicest bits, resulting in yet more brawls. One more test. One more way to stake your place among your brothers.

There had been a time when Z had sat back and waited for the leftovers, living like a scavenger, rather than join the flying fists and gnashing teeth. But his hunger was as strong as any of theirs—the kind of hunger that was never satisfied—and a few years into his training he had made the decision that he would never again be served last. After only a few victories, his pack brothers had stopped challenging him.

He still avoided Alpha Brock's wrath, despite having grown taller than him in the last year. Z did notice that even Brock hadn't seemed eager to pick any fights with him for a while, instead directing the majority of his cruelty toward mocking and manipulating Ran.

Or, Omega Kesley.

It had been clear from the start that Ran was the weakest. Z had hoped it was only because of his age and size, but soon it was obvious that his brother simply didn't have the fortitude necessary to carve out a place of respect among the pack.

Worst of all, he didn’t seem to understand why he remained at the bottom of the chain. He doted on Brock, mimicking the way he talked and attempting to duplicate his fight moves, though he didn’t have the upper body strength to pull most of them off. He had even begun sharpening his nails.

It made Z sick to see it. At times, he wanted to pull his brother aside and shake him and explain that he wasn’t helping himself. By cowing to everything Brock did, he was only making himself an easier target.

And yet, Ran had never given any indication that he wanted Z’s help, and so Z had let him be. Had watched as his brother clung pathetically to Brock’s side, hoping for recognition and receiving only table scraps.

Z was watching his brother gnaw on one of Brock’s abandoned bones, the meal whittled down now to pools of blood and shreds of charred flesh, when he caught the scents.

So many aromas. Jael among them, but the others were unknown. Forty…maybe fifty…

He whipped his head toward the main door of the dining hall, his brow furrowed.

It took a few moments of rowdy talk and chewing before the soldiers around him hushed. A hesitation—thaumaturges never came to the dining hall—before they all pushed back from the tables and jostled around one another to form their lines, wiping the juices from their chins.

Jael entered, along with forty-nine other thaumaturges, all in black coats. They spread out so that they formed a funnel from the entryway. Jael’s gaze found his pack and narrowed. A subtle warning.

Z drew his shoulders back until the muscles began to complain.

The silence was startling after the feast’s chaos. Z found a piece of meat stuck in a molar and tried to work it out without moving his jaw too much.

They waited.

And then, a new scent. Something floral and warm that reminded him of his mother.

A woman stepped out from the wide cavern, wearing a gauzy dress that billowed around her feet and a sheer veil that covered her face and drifted past her elbows. On top of the veil sat a delicate white crown, carved from shimmering regolith stone.

Z was glad that he was not the only one who gasped. He instantly peeled his gaze away from Her Majesty and stared straight ahead, at the black cavern wall. His palms began to sweat, but he resisted the urge to wipe them on his pants or check his face for remnants of their meal.

The piece of meat blissfully relinquished its hold on his tooth, and he swallowed.

“Gentlemen,” said the queen. “I am here to congratulate you on the progress you’ve all made as soldiers in my brilliant new army. I have been monitoring your training sessions for many months now, and I am pleased with what I’ve seen.”

A low rustle slipped through them—the faintest of fidgets. Z did not know how she could have watched them without their knowing. Maybe their training sessions had been recorded.

“You are all aware,” the queen continued, “that you are among the soldiers being considered for a unique mission that will aid in the hostilities between Luna and Earth. This is a role of honor, reserved for those who have risen above the confines of their past, the limitations of their bodies, and the fear of the unknown. They will be my most prized soldiers, chosen not only for their strength and bravery, but also for their intelligence, cunning, and adaptability. My court and I will be making our final selections soon.”

Her words were blurred in Z’s thoughts and he could think of nothing past a bead of sweat making its way down

his temple and how his fingers were beginning to twitch with too much energy and no outlet.

The queen, who had been as still as the soldiers until now, a faceless sheet speaking to them, lifted one arm and gestured to the thaumaturges. “I’m sure that I do not need to remind your thaumaturges that those who are in control of the selected packs will receive instant advancement in their court status.”

Z dared a glance at Jael and saw that his dark eyes had gone fierce, his jaw set.

“Gentlemen.”

Z snapped his gaze back to the wall.

“Your thaumaturges have asked for the opportunity to showcase some of their brightest soldiers. I look forward to the demonstration.” She swirled her fingers through the air and the thaumaturges spread out into the crowd.

Jael’s walk was tense as he reached them. “Alpha Brock,” he snapped, “you will be fighting. No teeth, no claws—I want to show your skill. Understood?”

Brock fisted his hand against his chest. “Yes, Master Jael. Who will be my opponent?”

Jael’s gaze swept to Beta Wynn. Though technically, all Betas had the same rank in the pack, everyone kept a mental record of wins and losses, of victories and failures, and everyone knew that Wynn wasn’t far behind Brock in his abilities.

But then Jael let out a slow breath. “Ze’ev.”

Z’s eyes widened, and he glanced at Master Jael, heat flooding his face. But Jael showed no humor or uncertainty, only a stern determination as he paced past the others and came to stand before him. Their gazes clashed, and it was with some shock that Z realized he was now taller than Master Jael too.

“She wants a show,” he said. “This time, don’t hold back.”

Z’s brow twitched, but he tried to remain neutral as he saluted his thaumaturge.

His thoughts were frenzied as they were marched into the largest training room. Her Majesty had been escorted onto a platform on one end and placed atop a throne so that she could watch the proceedings in comfort.

Fifty packs. Fifty fights.

Z's stomach was roiling as they began. He couldn't focus on the brawls. He was only seeing Jael's dark eyes, hearing his words over and over again. *This time, don't hold back.*

Did Jael think he faked his losses? Did Jael believe he was capable of defeating Brock, or did he only want to ensure that he lasted as long as he could?

Only once did he dare to glance over at his opponent and saw that Brock had a furious scowl. He obviously didn't think Z was a worthy opponent, not in front of the queen herself.

Ran, too, looked sullen, and although not a person in the room would have expected Ran to be chosen as one of Jael's examples, Z sensed that Ran had fantasized about such a chance to prove himself more than once.

Finally, their turn came.

Jael bowed to Her Majesty and introduced them—Alpha Brock fighting Beta Kesley.

Z could smell the blood from the previous fights, still warm and salty, mingling with the regolith dust. He and Brock trekked to the fighting circle and stared at each other.

Only when he sank into his fighting stance did he feel the panic and confusion subside.

He didn't win all his fights, but he won more than he lost. He had become strong and fast. He would not make a fool of himself in front of Her Majesty.

And if they amused her, perhaps she would choose their pack for her special mission. He would never have to go through the rest of the surgeries. He would never become a mindless beast in her army.

Brock's eyes flashed. There was a burning in his gaze that Z didn't recognize, but he was sure it carried a promise of pain.

Brock came at him first, with a right hook aimed at his jaw. Z ducked easily—too easily. Brock feinted at the last moment and drove his other fist into Z's side. Z clenched his teeth and pushed himself back, retaliating with a front kick to Brock's stomach.

They backed away from each other, bouncing on the balls of their feet, hands poised in front of their faces. A trickle of sweat dropped down Z's spine.

He squinted, watching the way Brock's body swayed, noticing how he briefly clenched his left fist.

A roundhouse kick was coming.

No sooner had he thought it than Brock whipped forward, aiming his foot for Z's head.

He caught it and pulled, throwing Brock onto his side.

Z danced out of Brock's reach, panting. Salt was beginning to sting his eyes. Brock didn't stay down long. He flashed his sharp teeth and rushed forward—

Jab to the ribs. Elbow to the face. Sideswipe kick.

He saw them all happening an instant before they did. *Block. Block. Jump. Attack.*

Teeth snapped as he landed an uppercut to Brock's jaw. A left hook to his side.

Brock withdrew, face contorted in fury. It was difficult for Z to hide his own surprise at this newfound skill.

But it wasn't new. It was from years of sitting on the sidelines, watching and studying and inspecting every fight, every brawl, every punch thrown, every victory won. He knew how Brock fought.

And, he suspected that if he were pitted against any one of his pack members, he would have seen the same signs, recognized the same tricks and tells.

He could beat them.

He could beat all of them.

Brock stretched his neck to one side and Z heard the sound of his spine popping. Brock shook it out like a dog, then sank into his stance again.

His eyes glinted.

Bolstered, Z shot forward.

Jab. Blocked.

Cross. Blocked.

Uppercut. Blocked.

Knee—

Z gasped, pain ripping through his abdomen as five nails dug into his side, piercing the flesh above his hip bone. Brock squeezed, digging his fingers deeper into the flesh. Z nearly collapsed, catching himself on Brock's shoulder with a strangled grunt.

"I will kill you before I let you win this fight," Brock breathed against him.

He let go all at once and stepped away. Without his support, Z fell to one knee. He pressed his hand against the wounds, not daring to look at Jael or the queen, to see if anyone noticed or cared that Brock had disobeyed the rules Jael had laid out for them.

But no. They were wild animals. Predators who ran on instinct and bloodthirst.

Who would expect a fair fight from such monsters?

All she wanted was a show.

He heard a low growl and didn't at first realize that it was coming from his own throat. He dared to look up. Brock's stance had relaxed. There was blood up to the first knuckles of his fingers.

Flashes of red sparked in the corners of Z's vision. His side throbbed.

"Best just to stay down," Brock said.

Z snarled. "You'll have to kill me."

He pushed himself off the ground and lunged forward. For a moment, Brock seemed startled, but then he was blocking again, knocking away every advance. But Z was fast, and finally a punch landed against Brock's cheek.

With a roar, Brock reached toward Z's wound, but Z dodged away and grasped Brock by the wrist, pulling him so

close he could smell the meat lingering on his breath. With his free hand, he grabbed Brock's throat. Hesitated.

Kill him.

The words stole into his head like the long night came upon the cities—sly, but complete. They possessed him, their command working their way into his desires and hunger and desperation and crawling down into his pulsing fingertips.

I want to see how you would do it.

He gritted his teeth.

Brock's nostrils widened. His eyes glowed with disdain as he sensed Z's indecision.

Z felt the shift in his opponent's weight and he knew it was coming. Fingernails in his side, the blinding pain, the white spots in his vision.

With a roar, he let go of Brock's wrist and grabbed the back of his head.

Snap.

He dropped the body to the ground before the light went out in his eyes.

Z's heart was thumping painfully, his blood a tsunami rushing through his ears.

But outside of him there was silence. Complete and endless silence.

Licking his salted lips, he tore his gaze away from Brock and the way his neck was bent all wrong.

His pack was watching him with disbelief and awe, but, to his surprise, there did not seem to be any hatred there.

His gaze continued. They were *all* gaping at him. The other packs, the thaumaturges. All except Jael, who didn't look exactly pleased, and yet didn't seem surprised, either.

Only when the queen stood did he dare to look at her. Her head was listed to the side, and he imagined a pensive expression behind the veil.

"Clean and efficient," she said, bringing her hands together for three solid claps. She had not applauded any of

the other fights. He did not know what it meant. “Well done…Alpha.”

His stomach flipped, but the queen was already gesturing for the body to be removed, for the fights to continue, and Z had to stumble off toward his pack before she retracted her praise. Her words followed him, as kind and gentle as a bell.

Well done. *Alpha*.

He had killed Brock, and in the law of the pack, he was now to take his place as the undisputed leader.

He was the new Alpha.

He paused in front of his pack brothers. None of them seemed surprised by the queen’s words. They had all known it the moment Brock hit the ground.

As he watched, they each brought their fists to their chests in mute respect. In silent acceptance of his victory. Even his brother saluted him, but there alone was bitterness. There, alone, was anger over Z’s success.

Z nodded twice—once to acknowledge the show of respect, and once at his brother, so that Ran would know that he saw his disappointment.

Then he slipped past them all and headed toward the barracks. He did not care if it was disrespectful to the queen or if Jael would be furious or if rumors of his insolence would spread throughout all of Luna by the time he emerged again.

He knew that Jael’s pack would be chosen for the queen’s mission because of him. They would become her special, prized soldiers. Their bodies would not be tampered with again.

With that one kill, he had ensured that she would never turn him into a monster.

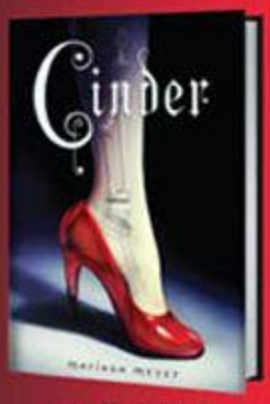
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